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Art in Review

Albert Oehlen

Luhring Augustine
531 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through May 30

Computer Paintings

Skarstedt Gallery
20 East 79th Street, Manhattan
Through May 30

With Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke's reputations now carved in stone, Albert Oehlen awaits elevation as the most unpredictable German painter of the moment. It's a good place.

These two shows present new and older work. Uptown, the Skarstedt Gallery has assembled a group of black-and-white paintings that Mr. Oehlen made or started making in the early 1990s, using a computer — but not only. Their grainy, spiraling lines have a live-wire snap and fizz that is regularly brought to a standstill by bits of collage and brushwork. What appears to be digital in the electronic sense may be digital in the sense that fingers were involved. These scribbles writ large have a Warholian sheen, a glamour that turns out to be more than skin deep.

Downtown, at Luhring Augustine, Mr. Oehlen takes up the brush in earnest, along with oil paint and a tropical palette. The style is slap-dash Abstract Expressionist, applied sparingly on canvases selectively collaged with Spanish posters advertising trade fairs, movies, surfing suits for women and whatnot.

Here the distinction between handwork and machine-made would seem self-evident, except it's not, and then it is. "Electrodomé" features a poster of a woman wielding a fishing rod over a James Rosenquist-like expanse of domestic staples: rolls of wood-grain contact paper. A second look reveals that the rolls are entirely and rather sloppily hand-painted.

In other instances second looks reveal unexpected excisions or additions to the posters or a semi-legible word cut out of painted paper. The notion of trompe l'oeil is upended; blazing white canvas plays a starring role.

Mr. Oehlen's paintings are both culturally witty and formally rigorous. He insists that any painting is foremost the story of its own making, and then makes the making extremely entertaining to watch.

ROBERTA SMITH